

Character Class

Stealthy Rascals

Rascally Races

By Skip Williams



Several installments ago, this column identified [four](#) basic character roles: sturdy brawler, stealthy rascal, arcane spellslinger, and divine guardian. We've already examined the [sturdy brawler](#) in detail. Now, we'll turn our attention to the stealthy rascal.

These characters depend on their wits and their skills to meet the challenges of adventuring. They can take the fight to the enemy fairly well, but they usually do better if they take a more subtle approach. Stealthy rascals can do well serving as a party's eyes and ears, probing the way ahead for hidden dangers or worthy opportunities. Depending on their skills and class features, they might also serve as a party's face and voice, negotiating or bluffing their way through encounters, tracking elusive foes, or breaking into closed areas.

You can delve into the role in many different ways. Start by considering the character's race.

Races for Stealthy Characters

Stealthy Rascals need to be quick witted, alert to danger and opportunity, flexible in their thinking, and fleet of foot. A character of nearly any race can manage this particular collection of qualities, but some are better suited for the role than others. You'll do best with a speedy and agile character, but you can make do with something less suitable if you relish a challenge or just want a character that doesn't fit the mold.

Dwarf

Most folks think of dwarves as brave, dour, taciturn, stalwart, and hard-working. Unfortunately, these qualities make dwarves the antithesis of the stealthy rascal, who prefers guile to brute force and often runs so he can live to fight another day. A dwarf's Charisma penalty makes them poor negotiators, and a dwarf's low speed -- 20 feet -- often makes a quick getaway difficult to accomplish.

Nevertheless, dwarf rascals function well in some roles. Their darkvision allows them to function underground or outdoors at night without using a light source that would give them away while they're sneaking around. The dwarven stonecunning ability makes them particularly effective spelunkers and tomb breakers. A dwarf's ability to appraise stone or metal often comes in handy, especially when deciding which treasures to grab first when time presses or when fencing ill-gotten gains.

A dwarf's saving throw bonuses against spells and poison often allow them to avoid or withstand effects that would incapacitate other rascals. Likewise, a dwarf's racial Constitution bonus makes them sturdier than most other rascals.

A dwarf's combat bonuses against giants and goblinoids can make a dwarf particularly effective when using the rogue's sneak attack ability or the ranger's favored enemy class feature. Because dwarves often favor law and discipline, the monk class can prove a good fit for them, and the monk's fast movement ability can help offset the dwarf's lack of speed. Most dwarves, however, prefer lusty living over a monk's ascetic lifestyle. Dwarves can do well as ninjas or spellthieves. The dwarven Charisma penalty usually makes them poor bards.



Half-Orc

Half-orcs have a reputation for doing things their own way, which suits a rascal well. Like dwarves, however, half-orcs are more martial than subtle or stealthy. A half-orc rascal shares many of the same advantages and impediments with a dwarf rascal, including a racial Charisma penalty. In addition, their racial Intelligence penalty makes them less skillful than other rascals.

Nevertheless, a half-orc can function well as a thug, burglar, or nightfighter. A half-orc functions well in darkness thanks to the character's darkvision. A half-orc's racial Strength bonus makes the character an effective melee combatant. A half-orc usually doesn't excel at negotiation or information gathering because of his racial Charisma penalty.

A half-orc can function well as a scout or ranger. They likewise make effective rogues, especially if they concentrate on skills that improve stealth, mobility, and manual dexterity. A monk or ninja's self-discipline and often subtle manner doesn't fit well with most people's idea of what a half-orc ought to be, but a half-orc can be effective in either class. A half-orc's Charisma penalty limits his success as a bard.



Human

A human can enter just about any class and do well. A human has no ability bonus to help her fill a rascal's role, but she has no ability penalty to limit her options either. A human's inability to see in the dark poses some problems when sneaking around in the gloom, but a human's bonus feat and extra skill points can make up for that nicely.

A human's bonus skill points help your character truly master a particular role or broaden your options. For example, if you're building a sneak thief, you might spend those extra skill points on the Sleight of Hand skill (to become an accomplished pickpocket), or you might spend them on Escape Artist or Tumble (the better to get away if things go awry).

The human bonus feat is likewise handy for sharpening a character's focus or adding a new capability. The Skill Focus feat can grant you a hefty +3 bonus on a single skill, which can prove handy when applied to a skill you use often. Or you might choose Martial Weapon Proficiency and become proficient with a weapon such as a longsword that your stealthy class normally doesn't make available to you. A feat such as Dodge, on the other hand, is useful for giving any character a defensive edge. The Blind-Fight feat can help offset a human's inability to see in the dark.

You might use the human bonus feat to get the most from a class feature. For example, the Improved Initiative feat is great for getting the drop on foes and bringing the rogue's sneak attack class feature into play.



Elf

Elves make exceptional rascals, and they have a reputation for free living that suits a rascal well. An elf's racial Dexterity bonus is helpful for defense and proves vital for many of the skills a stealthy rascal relies on. An elf's racial Constitution penalty makes for a fragile character, but rascals usually rely more on their wits than their ability to withstand physical punishment.

Elven racial familiarity with swords and bows gives them excellent combat options even when their classes don't offer much in the way of weaponry. An elf's racial bonus on Search, Spot, and Listen checks is useful for noticing things others miss,



and an elf's ability to locate secret doors allows an elf rascal to do some extraordinary scouting when underground or indoors. An elf's low-light vision usually allows the character to function well at night and often allows the character to get along with minimal light indoors or underground. Finally, an elf's resistance to sleep and charm effects can help the character avoid attacks or effects that would knock out other rascals.



Elves make excellent scouts or rogues. They can do very well in most other stealthy classes as well. A ranger's broad array of weaponry makes the elf's racial weapon proficiencies moot, but a ranger's combination of stealth, woodcraft, and martial powers are an excellent fit for an elf.

Half-Elf

Like humans, half-elves have neither a racial ability bonus nor an ability penalty, which leaves them fairly well positioned to enter any stealthy class. Half-elves lack a human's bonus skill points and bonus feat, but they share many advantages with elves, such as a bonus on Spot and Listen checks and low-light vision.

A half-elf's racial bonus on Diplomacy and Gather Information checks make them particularly good negotiators and investigators. The bard and rogue classes work well for this kind of character.

Halfling

Halflings excel at stealth, and their natural agility makes them good choices for any physically active rascal. Lidda, the iconic rogue presented in the *Player's Handbook*, is a halfling.



Like elves, halflings gain a racial bonus to Dexterity. Halflings have a racial Strength penalty that can be a hindrance in melee, but most rascals can live with that. A halfling's small size limits the damage the character can expect to deal with a weapon (and the character's Strength penalty makes matters worse); however, that size also gives the character a hefty bonus (+4) on Hide checks and may allow him to squeeze through spaces a larger character couldn't. A halfling's racial bonus on Move Silently checks makes the character extra stealthy, a handy trait for any rascal. A halfling's short stature also gives the character a fairly slow base speed of 20 feet, which can make a quick getaway tough to manage. A halfling can do better outwitting foes or perhaps hiding when a hasty departure is in order.

A halfling can do fairly well in combat, despite the hindrances noted above. The character's Small size improves Armor Class. Small characters also receive an attack bonus that helps offset a halfling's Strength penalty. Halflings gain extra attack bonuses with thrown weapons and slings. A halfling's saving throw bonuses give her an extra edge in combat and other dangerous situations. A halfling can do especially well if she chooses the Weapon Finesse feat and uses light weaponry or a rapier for melee.

Halflings make excellent rogues or scouts. A halfling ranger can get extra mileage out of the ranger's animal companion class feature by selecting a Medium fighting animal, such as a wolf, as a mount. Halfling monks don't deal much damage with their unarmed attacks, but halflings must deal with that problem whenever they fight, with or without weapons. A monk's fast movement class feature helps offset a halfling's lack of speed, and a halfling's stealth bonuses can make for a monk that's nigh undetectable. A halfling ninja enjoys similar advantages.

Gnome

Gnomes share many advantages and disadvantages with halflings and dwarves when building stealthy characters. Like halflings, gnomes have a racial Strength penalty, and they are size Small. Like both halflings and dwarves, a gnome's base speed is only 20 feet.

On the plus side, gnomes share the dwarf's racial Constitution bonus, which makes them tough rascals. Gnomes also gain combat bonuses against kobolds, goblinoids, and giants. Like halflings, a gnome's Small size has some advantages in combat and helps with Hide checks, and a gnome also enjoys bonuses to saving throws against illusions and to Listen skill checks -- both useful for avoiding ambushes and other deceptions. A gnome can treat a gnome hooked hammer as a martial weapon, which usually isn't helpful to a rascal, but worth remembering nevertheless. Finally, a gnome with a Charisma score of at least 10 gains a small repertoire of spell-like abilities that can prove useful for keeping foes off balance during a fight or whenever attempting to confuse or confound an opponent.



Gnomes can do well as rogues or bards (Gimble, the iconic bard presented in the *Player's Handbook*, is a gnome). Gnomes also can do well as rangers, scouts, or monks.

Other Races

Thus far, we've limited our discussion to races from the *Player's Handbook*. Other books provide many other races for player characters. Here are a few guidelines for building scoundrels of other races.

Dexterity, Charisma, and Wisdom are often important to scoundrels. Look for bonuses to these scores. Most scoundrels must meet physical challenges from time to time, so a Constitution bonus is handy.

Races that have penalties to physical ability scores can prove effective scoundrels, but such characters require careful handling. For example, a scoundrel with a poor Dexterity score probably should rely on deception, negotiation, and clever thinking rather than combat and stealth.

Consider how a race's skill bonuses and special abilities can help you carry off your character concept.

Look beyond a race's ability adjustments to find abilities that might prove useful. Sometimes, a race has advantages that aren't immediately obvious. Some of the material presented here can help you. For example, we've seen that Small size helps a character with Hide checks and is useful for stealthy characters despite its drawbacks in combat. For scoundrels who'd like to creep about in the dark, darkvision is very helpful.

Let's consider the goblin from the *Monster Manual* with the foregoing in mind. The goblin has a +2 Dexterity bonus but has penalties to Wisdom and Charisma. The goblin also is Small and has a racial bonus on Move Silently checks. Despite its Small size, a goblin has a land speed of 30 feet. A goblin excels at sneaking around and can move at a decent speed but doesn't do well with perception or interaction skills. A goblin would make a decent rogue, ninja, or scout, but wouldn't do as well as a bard or monk.

Sometimes you can build a worthy scoundrel from a race that seems unlikely at first glance. For example, lizardfolk stand more than 6 feet tall, are scaly, and have tails, big teeth, and claws. They have a bonus to Strength and Constitution and a penalty to Intelligence. A lizardfolk isn't a great choice if you're looking for a character that can unobtrusively reconnoiter a town, and lizardfolk are none too skillful. On the other hand, lizardfolk have a formidable array of natural weaponry, a bonus to Balance, Jump, and Swim skills, the ability to hold their breath for extended periods, and a hefty natural armor bonus. Lizardfolk can make effective fighting scoundrels, such as rangers, scouts, or monks. Lizardfolk also can function well as tomb breakers, infiltrators, or even cat burglars.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.